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Essay

A More Possible Meeting: Initial Reflections on Engaging (As) the Oppressor

Nicola Soekoe[†]

*We have chosen each other
and the edge of each other's battles
the war is the same
if we lose
someday women's blood will congeal
upon a dead planet
if we win there is no telling
we seek beyond history
for a new and more possible meeting.
Audre Lorde, excerpt of "Outlines"¹*

In the poem included above, civil rights poet, activist, and revolutionary Audre Lorde reminds us of the agency we have in deciding whether to embark on the paradigm-shifting project of seeing and choosing each other across difference and creating the conditions for a "more possible meeting." Lorde is speaking to a profound shift that needs to take place within the consciousness of every person in order for contact across difference to even hold the potentiality of genuine (and therefore revolutionary) connection. In "Age, Race, Class and Sex: Women Redefining Difference," the essay from which I drew the poem, Lorde sets out as a prerequisite to this exchange the task of dismantling "that piece of the oppressor which is planted deep within each of us, and which knows only the oppressors' tactics, the oppressors' relationships."² Decolonial theorist Anibal Quijano conveys a similar argument: "[E]pistemic decolonization is necessary to make possible and

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1. Audre Lorde, *Age, Race, Class and Sex: Women Redefining Difference*, in *SISTER OUTSIDER: ESSAYS AND SPEECHES* 123 (1996).

2. *Id.*

move toward a truly intercultural communication; to an exchange of experiences and significations as the foundation of an-other rationality.”³

In this essay I want to think about what is variously described by the thinkers I will draw on as a “crossing,” an “exchange,” or a “meeting” – a type of contact between groups situated differently along the axes of oppression that holds the potential for deep coalition-building and revolutionary love. More specifically, I want to think about the shift that must take place in the oppressor group’s consciousness for that meeting to be rendered “more possible.”

As a popular educator who embodies multiple overlapping oppressor identities, I will not attempt to answer whether such a meeting is actually possible.⁴ It may not be. I will not attempt to predict what the results of such meetings would be if they occurred, or whether it is politically prudent for those engaged in liberation struggles to work towards such a meeting. I have chosen to engage with the oppressor – my community, my own self – in response to repeated calls to do so from activists past and present. My commitment to creating the conditions for a meeting across difference is a result of that engagement, of bearing witness to barriers within myself and others that render contact between groups politically futile. This essay is not an answer. It is instead a personal reflection on how popular educators working with oppressor groups might develop a pedagogical praxis that will best position members of oppressor groups to engage in the project of building genuine and generative connections with those different from ourselves. The ideas presented here are tentative, questioning, and open.

I will be speaking about my engagement as a white South African with other white South Africans – a group that, while heterogeneous, can still be defined as the dominant oppressor group in South Africa today.⁵

Barriers To Engaging Across Difference

Engaging with a dominant group of which I am a part has been my most difficult work. Despite our privilege, my community and I lack the shared vocabulary, the social awareness, and the political literacy to engage deeply in discussions about power, identity, and oppression. Most fundamentally, as a collective, we have shown that we lack the necessary commitment to the revolutionary project of decolonising our ways of knowing, being, and relating to others and the world.

3. Anibal Quijano, *Coloniality of Power, Eurocentrism, and Latin America*, 1:3 NEPANTLA: VIEWS FROM SOUTH 447 (2003) IN WALTER D MIGNOLO, *DELINKING*, 21:2 CULTURAL STUDIES 499(2007).

4. A term used widely in South Africa to describe facilitators of popular education. Popular education can be defined loosely as a participatory pedagogical praxis that aims to ‘conscientize’ participants for the purpose of making visible, and undoing, injustice.

5. Any attempt to bifurcate a population into “oppressor” and “oppressed” groups necessarily collapses the various intersections at which individuals find themselves and in doing so limits the complexity of analysis. However, it is also important to isolate white people as a distinct category of analysis because the invisibility of whiteness has often allowed us to evade group reckoning and responsibility under the cloak of individuality.

When I have engaged with/as an oppressor group I have noted three important constructs held up by the oppressor that stifle meaningful interactions. As a group, we uphold an immutable conception of what social organisation is normal (white supremacy), what social organisation is desirable (white supremacy), and what alternative social organisation is realistically achievable (none). So long as white South Africans are able to uphold the fixedness of those constructs in our group consciousness – rendering alternatives unrealistic, irrational, and impractical – we will never be able to engage across difference to co-create new ways of being and relating in the world.

Many popular education projects target the first two constructs, that which is normal and that which is desirable. First, they try to jolt participants into an awareness of the abnormality of the *status quo*. Common strategies here are distributing fact sheets, screening documentaries, and inviting speakers from minoritized groups. The aim is that, through this process of de-naturalization, participants come to see, often through a lens of guilt, that the *status quo* is morally reprehensible and needs to change. Some popular educators then try to tackle the second construct by engaging participants in a visioning exercise whereby they imagine a world free from oppression. This creative process often serves as a powerful motivating factor for oppressor groups, allowing us to relinquish that familiar defence that equates societal change solely with loss.

However, even when members of the oppressor group recognise the abnormality of the *status quo*, and the desirability of change (at least superficially), we often close off the possibility of revolutionary change by claiming that it is not viable. We may rely on the “scientific” discipline of economics; on supposed truisms about human nature and the innate instinct to compete and oppress; or on “facts” about the minoritized group’s culture that make equality impossible. I believe this process of rendering alternatives impossible is in part subconscious. James Baldwin writes how white Americans are so invested in justifying the *status quo* that they have become “unable even to envision [the required changes].”⁶ A contemporary counterpart to this construct is neoliberalism, which has been tremendously effective in making itself and the systems it upholds invisible.⁷ It does not appear to be an ideology at all, but simply the way things are. Neoliberalism is a perfect complement to globalized white supremacy (and patriarchy) because it allows those in power to dismiss as unrealistic any proposals for a social organisation based on alternative conceptions of justice, duty and human value. As a popular educator it is exhausting to encounter a defence springing from this well-formulated construct that shrinks and distorts the parameters of the possible. One can never have enough facts, or a rigorous

6. James Baldwin, *The Fire Next Time* 85 (Taschen ed. 2017).

7. Various social theorists have discussed the invisibility of neoliberalism. For a succinct analysis, see George Monbiot, *Neoliberalism – the ideology at the root of all our problems*, THE GUARDIAN (Apr. 15, 2016), www.theguardian.com/books/2016/apr/15/neoliberalism-ideology-problem-george-monbiot. (“Imagine if the people of the Soviet Union had never heard of communism. The ideology that dominates our lives has, for most of us, no name. . . . So pervasive has neoliberalism become that we seldom even recognise it as an ideology.”).

enough argument, to convince those invested in maintaining the *status quo* of the legitimacy of alternative proposals for how we can order our world.

Decolonial Theory and Maldonado-Torres' Concept of the Prayer

Decolonial theory has helped me to articulate the frustrated helplessness I feel when encountering, in myself and others, a closedness that relies on the above constructs to evade true engagement in and with the world we are upholding.

Colonialism describes empirical historical periods defined by certain geopolitical conditions. Coloniality, a corollary of modernity, describes the hierarchical and enduring "logic, metaphysics, ontology, and matrix of power"⁸ that flow from colonialism. According to decolonial theorist Nelson Maldonado-Torres, decoloniality "refers to efforts at rehumanizing the world, to breaking hierarchies of difference that dehumanize subjects and communities and that destroy nature, and to the production of counter-discourses, counter-knowledges, counter-creative acts, and counter-practices that seek to dismantle coloniality and to open up multiple other forms of being in the world."⁹

How can members of oppressor groups adopt a posture that will best position us to engage in that project? Can decoloniality make the rigid constructs of what is normal, desirable, and realistically achievable more porous to alternative visions?

In a recent lecture, Maldonado-Torres analysed revolutionary philosopher and psychoanalyst Frantz Fanon's choice to end his seminal book *Black Skin/White Masks* with a prayer.¹⁰ The prayer – "O my body, make of me always a man who questions!"¹¹ – is significant for Maldonado-Torres because a prayer signifies humble realisation of vulnerability, the difficulty of questioning, and the acceptance that one cannot embark on the project alone.¹² This humility, according to Marilyn Frye, is the understanding that, "to know the seen one must consult something other than one's will and interest and fears and imagination."¹³ For members of oppressor groups, the reliance on a prayer signifies a recognition that the work of shedding white epistemology and anti-blackness requires a relinquishing of the certainty and control with which we approach the world.¹⁴ A prayer in this sense helps us to embody a decolonial posture by approaching knowledge and being in a way that departs from the rigid practices of knowing recognised by coloniality. One example of a decolonial prayer already in use in many

8. Nelson Maldonado-Torres, *Outline of Ten Theses on Coloniality and Decoloniality*, FOUNDATION FRANTZ FANON at 10 (2016).

9. *Id.*

10. Nelson Maldonado-Torres, *A Genealogy of the Decolonial*, ACADEMY OF SCIENCE SOUTH AFRICA DISTINGUISHED VISITING SCHOLAR LECTURE at 7 (Mar. 2019).

11. Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks* 199 (Pluto ed. 2008).

12. Maldonado-Torres, *supra* note 11.

13. Marilyn Frye, *The politics of reality: Essays in feminist theory* 75 (Crossing Press ed. 2017). While Frye is discussing the 'loving eye,' the posture of the 'loving eye' correlates in many ways to that of the prayer in Maldonado-Torres' conception.

14. Maldonado-Torres, *supra* note 11.

spaces in the United States is the opening of an academic lecture by recognising the original inhabitants of the land on which the event takes place.

The anti-prayer, in contrast, refers to strategies used by whiteness and coloniality to resist that process of opening up. In the academic arena, Maldonado-Torres identifies anti-prayers such as the prioritisation of discipline and method over attitude and experience, or the appeal to abstract universalism which renders embodied attempts at opening and closing irrelevant.¹⁵

A Decolonial Analysis Of The Three Constructs

Maldonado-Torres' enunciation of the anti-prayer allowed me to see that defences that insist on the impracticality/irrationality/unrealistic nature of proposals for alternative social structures are simply anti-prayers used to avoid interrogation of coloniality. Maldonado-Torres illustrates how "the standards of reason constantly change in the effort to make the questions about colonialism and decolonization inert and irrelevant, as well as making the questioner appear as out of place, out of time, and problematic."¹⁶ This understanding explains why certain concepts that were once seen as highly unrealistic and irrational, such as free-market economics, can be co-opted into the realm of the possible if they can be used to uphold the *status quo*.¹⁷ In contrast, those that question coloniality will remain at the level of idealism. The scripts that constitute the anti-prayer are "already inscribed in disciplines, methods, and texts" so that "individuals only have to rely on what they take as established knowledge."¹⁸

The prayer, and the decolonial posture it engenders, is an attempt to rehumanize the oppressed person. Coloniality divides populations into those who are afforded full humanity and those who are considered not-human or not-human enough and are discarded to what Fanon terms the "zone of nonbeing."¹⁹ Maldonado-Torres explains:

Living in the zone of sub-humanity means, not only that one is not meant to have easy access to basic means of existence, but also that it is normal for everything and everyone, including oneself, to question one's humanity.²⁰

15. *Id.*

16. Maldonado-Torres, *supra* note 9.

17. Economist Ha-Joon Chang illustrates how this process operates in the field of economics, where interventionist trade and industrial policies that advanced economies once adopted as the most 'rational' choice for development in their countries have now been reconceptualized as radically protectionist and simply 'bad policy.' See Ha-Joon Chang, *Kicking Away the Ladder: Development Strategy in Historical Perspective* (2007). Similar dynamics play out in the policy arena and the social sciences more generally. For example, I recently witnessed a wealthy community, upon hearing about a proposal for social housing in their suburb, resort to economics, social theory, and human psychology to argue why the project could never work.

18. Chang, *Kicking Away the Ladder: Development Strategy in Historical Perspective* at 9.

19. Fanon, *supra* note 12.

20. Maldonado-Torres, *supra* note 9 at 13.

For those who are condemned to the zone of non-being, their suffering is considered to be “in accordance to the perceived order of nature and the world.”²¹ A result of this dehumanization, which can be traced to the Enlightenment but is a key feature of modernity, is the normalization of a perpetual state of war against the oppressed.²² Through the lens of decolonial theory, the first construct, which defines what social organisation is normal, collapses then into the question of “Who is human?”, for only when a group of people is dehumanized can the constant state of war in which they live be considered normal. We can read Sojourner Truth’s lasting question “Ain’t I a woman?” and the Movement for Black Lives’ cry “Black Lives Matter!” as assertions of humanity that resist the normalization of suffering for those exiled to the zone of nonbeing.

The second construct, which defines what social organisation is desirable, can also be collapsed into the question of “Who is human?”. So long as the oppressed group exists in the zone of nonbeing, their absence/erasure from dominant culture is not seen as a “grievable” absence at all. No change to the *status quo* is rendered necessary or desirable. Kyla Hazell draws on Judith Butler’s concept of “ungrievability” to illustrate how coloniality constructs indifference towards the loss of oppressed peoples through a process of dehumanization.²³

Anti-racist scholar Robin DiAngelo, in her book *What Does It Mean to be White?*, reproduces responses she received from her white students when she asked them to reflect on the impact of race on their upbringing. Many responses resemble this one:

I was really lucky. I grew up in in an all-white neighbourhood and went to mostly white schools, so I didn’t learn anything about racism. My family taught me that everyone is the same.²⁴

The homogeneity of this student’s experience is seen as a privilege, not a lack. The absence/erasure/destruction/misappropriation of the lives and ways of being and knowing of oppressed peoples is not experienced as loss, because oppressed peoples are confined to the zone of nonbeing. Feminist philosopher Marie Lugones describes realising of the oppressor that “[t]heir ‘world’ and their integrity do not require me at all. There is no sense of self-loss in them for my own lack of solidity.”²⁵ Unlike in the collective project articulated in Lorde’s poem above, here, the war is not the same. The oppressor does not experience reality as war at all — it is just the normal organisation of society. As such, the desirability of the *status quo* remains intact.

21. *Id.* at 17.

22. Nelson Maldonado-Torres, *On the coloniality of being: Contributions to the development of a concept*, 21:2-3 CULTURAL STUDIES 249 (2007).

23. Kyla Jane Hazell, *Immovability as the coloniality of frozen affect: Exploring ungrievability and the transformative potential of (e)motion in the Modern world system*, UNPUBLISHED THESIS: UNIVERSITY OF CAPE TOWN 12 (2017).

24. Robin DiAngelo, *What Does It Mean to Be White? Developing White Racial Literacy – Revised Edition* 208 (2016).

25. Maria Lugones, *Pilgrimages/Peregrinajes: Theorizing Coalition Against Multiple Oppressions* 83 (2003).

The final construct, which delineates what change is realistically achievable, is simply an anti-prayer, used and manipulated to legitimise whatever social organisation we deem desirable. While I originally thought it posed the greatest challenge to popular educators, I now see that it is simply deflecting attention away from sites of necessary engagement. This construct can also, then, be subsumed under the question of “Who is human?”.

A Pedagogical Praxis That Asks, “Who Is Human?”

At first, I believed that in order to make genuine engagement across difference possible we needed to wrestle back the power to redefine what social organisation is normal, what is desirable, and what is realistically achievable. Now I see that the task really lies in being open, and opening others, to the reconfiguring of our conceptions of who is human.

What does this mean for pedagogical praxis?

I am only beginning to explore this question. Learning from black South African activists and decolonial scholars globally, I hope to develop a facilitation style that uses forms of decolonial prayer to create spaces of uncertainty and of vulnerability that, in turn, reveal the extent of dehumanization and the urgency of forging new ways of being, knowing, and relating.

Injairu Kulundu, reflecting on her experience as a student activist in South Africa, argues that decoloniality must be a relational praxis, “an intuitive ‘figuring out’ with others in a dialogical way.”²⁶ We need to recognise our “obsession with clarity and fully formed ideas” as an anti-prayer in itself and embrace uncertainty as a “decolonial methodology.”²⁷ The need for a specific plan is a form of anti-prayer evoked “to find excuses not to join a movement or take it seriously.”²⁸

Lugones, in discussing “crossings that would initiate deep coalitions” between groups, says that “it is important to cross, to go through, in uncertainty, open to risking one’s own ground, including one’s own self-understanding.”²⁹ An openness to uncertainty assumes an epistemic position not bound by “the meaning and norms that constitute one’s [own] ground.” It enables one “to find in others one’s own possibility and theirs.”³⁰

Given the potentiality that flows from such an undertaking, we need also to embrace vulnerability, which can be defined as “a basic kind of openness to being affected and affecting in both positive and negative ways.”³¹ It is thus a necessary component of decoloniality, which requires from subjects and collectives an openness to growth and correction as well as comfort with

26. Injairu Kulundu, *Moving Through Methodologies: Fostering Decolonial Sensibilities In Our Own Rite(s)*, T-LEARNING TRANSFORMATIVE KNOWLEDGE NETWORK (Nov. 2017).

27. *Id.*

28. Maldonado-Torres, *supra* note 11 at 30.

29. Lugones, *supra* note 26 at 26.

30. *Id.*

31. Erinn Gilson, *Vulnerability, ignorance, and oppression*, 26:2 HYPATIA 310 (2011).

the unfinished project.³² Oppressor groups are vulnerable in this project because we recognise that engaging in this way risks us seeing members of the oppressed group as fully human, which will expose the farcical nature of the constructs upon which we base our identity and humanity. For Lugones, “we risk our ground as we prepare our ground, we stand on a ground that is a crossing.”³³

Vulnerability and openness to uncertainty could lead to a fundamental shift in our practices of knowing. Caribbean poet and theorist Édouard Glissant proposes, in contrast to the Modern Western idea of *grasping* knowledge, the concept “donner-avec” – which sees knowledge and knowing as a relational practice of extending with generosity, a practice that “gives-on-and-with.”³⁴ Listening to and working with *donner-avec* involves “being willing to be vulnerable, to be open, to epistemic shifts, open to ways of understanding that will challenge normalcy and our place in its reproduction.”³⁵

I do not believe there is a set strategy that popular educators can use to open oppressor groups up to reconfiguring our understanding of who is human, nor do I think we should be searching for one. Our starting point should be vulnerability and an openness to uncertainty, and our praxis should be one of continual unlearning and relearning, of questions rather than answers. It should involve many prayers of different kinds. I believe that if we commit ourselves to decolonial prayer, and if we remain vigilant to the different anti-prayers we will no doubt encounter, we can prepare ourselves for the type of meeting across difference that might create another way of knowing, being, and relating.

32. Maldonado-Torres, *supra* note 9 at 319.

33. Lugones, *supra* note 26 at 33.

34. Édouard Glissant, *Poetics of Relation* (University of Michigan Press ed. 2009). For a thorough description of the concept of ‘donner-avec’ in see the translator’s note on xiv. I first encountered the concept in Sara Lucia Hoagland, *Colonial Practices/ Colonial Identities: All the Woman are Still White, The Center Must Not Hold: White Women Philosophers on the Whiteness of Philosophy* (George Yancy ed. 2011).

35. *Id.* at 237.